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How to become an 'adult educator' in the interwar Romania: the examples of Nicolae Iorga and Dimitrie Gusti

Very near from another moment of the European Union enlargement, it has come the time to reconsider the place of some valuable local adult education traditions in Central and Eastern Europe. Having in sight the topic of the 11th ESVA Conference, I have chosen the examples of two outstanding personalities in the interwar Romania.

The activity of Nicolae Iorga and Dimitrie Gusti in the field of adult education in interwar Romania still requires analysis for a fully understanding of its historical meaning and importance. Therefore, when trying to explain the way they have taken to become adult educators, the present paper takes into account more than previous interpretations some aspects concerning their professional background, the theoretical and practical knowledge of adult education they had both at the time and their ways to transform ideas into institutions in the above-mentioned field.

As a result of the analysis of what Iorga and Gusti have explicitly or implicitly asserted concerning adult education, one could find at least 5 distinct features. I intend to present them as steps for a future more detailed view of how Gusti and Iorga have understood adult education at their time: adult education is intimately linked to the politics of culture – in fact it is an important part of this one; adult education is different from school pedagogy; there are important differences between them; there is a peculiar difference between andragogy as *theory* (i.e. the principles of adult education) and the *practice* of adult education; adult education does not identify itself – as both process and outcome – with the bare assimilation of some disciplines, theories or formal principles; adult education does not mean the mere mechanical adoption of what has been done in other countries, but the making of the outland experience compatible with that of inland, by stimulating the innovation, initiative and self-responsibility.

In the end, as I did in other occasion¹, I propose a brief discussion about the meaning of this impressive cultural and educational heritage for

1 Isac, Ionut (2004): From Free Market Economy to Human Development. An Ethical Approach for Lifelong Learning in Romania. In: Lifelong Learning in Europe. Vol. 9, Nr. 4. P. 260-263

nowadays Romanian adult education in European context.

0. Motivation of the subject

The history of adult education in Romania has certainly got its landmarks with the achievements of the world-famous historian, professor and researcher, member of the Romanian Academy Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940) and the with the research work of the outstanding sociologist and social philosopher Dimitrie Gusti (1880-1955). They are indeed the most distinguished forerunners of nowadays adult education in Romania. They have found their way to adult education in a time of strong demands for modernization and enhancement of activity in all the regions of the country. The new Romanian reality after the 1st World War required more well trained and educated adult people, according to a paradigm different from classic school standards.

Obviously, the capital question for the present-day historian, researcher and/or practitioner in adult education is: how did they become adult educators? On this subject-matters there has been already published a specific article of Prof. Dr. Nicolae Sacalis from the University of Bucharest², which briefly describes the biographical coordinates of Iorga and Gusti, mentioning their major achievements in the work of adult education. I absolutely agree with this article as a whole, in all its considerations. However, I will try, on one hand, to insist on the historical interpretation of these key issues and, on the other hand, to make them a more specific analysis according to the title of my paper. Otherwise saying, I am going to be more comprehensive, with the accent on historical interpretations.

1. Politics of culture and adult education

Having in sight the point of how Iorga and Gusti did become adult educators, I emphasize the idea that the most plausible answer to this question is connected to the well-known concern, both common to Iorga and Gusti, when dealing with adult education: i.e. *the politics of culture* ('politica culturii'). It could be argued that, in their view, *education* and *culture* were almost synonym concepts.

As politicians (ministers of education and culture), Iorga and

2 Sacalis, Nicolae (1998): Nicolae Iorga and Dimitrie Gusti: Two Pioneers of Adult Education in Romania. In: Friedenthal-Haase, Marta (ed.): Personality and Biography: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Adult Education, Vol. II: Biographies of Adult Educators from Five Continents. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. P. 705-710

Gusti conceived a particular way of adult education by the building of *people's culture* ('cultura poporului'), inside of which each and every individual develops his/her own *personality as a whole* on the purpose of *social efficient activity*. Moreover, they had in mind the building of *pedagogy of culture* specific to Romanian people as well as a *Romanian ethics*.

While understanding the politics of culture as a way of enhancing people's capabilities and shaping the individual behavior in order to fit the needs of the community and those of the country, Gusti was insisting on defining its goal: i.e. the achievement of *people's culture*. In his view, the culture is both process and product. As a *process*, culture means the making of the 'inside man', capable of insertion as an active member within the social *milieu*. As an *outcome*, culture represents a relationship of intensity between the human being and the cultural assets. The adult education has to give the right direction and substantially contribute to the achievement of this purpose.

Similarly, Iorga insisted on cultivating people's inner force (i.e. 'the spiritual soul'), thus making them ready to give the full strength of the nation even during the most difficult moments of the history. Not the material means (civilization) but especially this spiritual soul (culture) is that of making the difference when one needs to have responsible educated adults able to build a house of their own or to defend their country. 'If one wants to do politics of culture, that person must feed the soul of a whole nation with what it belongs the most, with what can be transformed in every moment into that active force capable to surmount all difficulties'³.

This way, the education of adult people appears to be a very substantial and important part of politics of culture, i.e. the moral-spiritual elevation of everybody according to social requirements and the cultivation of personal qualities in the direction of social cohesion.

2. Professional background. School pedagogy and adult education

Neither Iorga nor Gusti identified adult education through politics of culture with a certain scholar specialization. They both grasped the peculiar character of adult education as not being a mere prolongation of school instruction. As the article of Mr. Prof. Sacalis

3 Iorga, Nicolae (1927): Conference at the Romanian Social Institute in Bucharest, November 20. In: Sacalis, Nicolae (1997): Politics of Culture and Politics of Education – in Romania and abroad. Bucharest: National Romanian Adult Education Association, Folk Univ. 'Ioan I. Dalles'. P. 113

has let all these aspects at the implicit level⁴, it has to be pointed out the importance of their professional background, which made them to pay a lot of attention toward the educational needs of grown-up Romanians.

Iorga and Gusti were aware of the fact that, in different fields, a pre-requisite of successful activity as well as of peaceful living together within community was a special kind of education – addressed to challenges of real life, not to the mere scholar demands –, which people very often did not have the opportunity to acquire.

Iorga criticized the school education, which he finds made under a scholastic 'blueprint' and split from real life because of its abstract principles often inapplicable in practice. Thus, too much theory makes school becoming rather a sequestration of students from life, while the greatest reform of school would be that of giving instruction without forbidding them what real life depicts to anybody. Adult education comes somehow to fill that 'gap' of scholastic school education, in a manner proper for grown-up people. Even if school has to guide the evolution of life, eventually, real life must be shown itself as a guidebook for school. This is a major difference between the education of pupils and that of grown-up people.

Sometimes, a fable is recommended in education, therefore Iorga fabricates one by himself. Let us imagine, he says, a society of people supervised at every single action by a would-be 'Big pedagogue' endowed with a notebook for giving marks to each and every one, always. Such kind of society would fail very quickly in reality and could not be reasonable conceived, because grown-up people are by definition independent and responsible for their acts. Adult education means to stress these features of grown-up personality and shape them according to efficient social activity and to the benefit of all.

In his turn, during a conference at the Romanian Social Institute in Bucharest, referring to the needs of education of young people in the villages, Gusti said that 'We need schools managed according to the most recent principles of pedagogy of culture, to the principles of pedagogy of grown-up youth, Andragogik'⁵. Thus, he emphasized the importance of making a new kind of 'school' (as an institution of

4 See Ibidem, passim

5 Gusti, Dimitrie (1928): Conference at the Romanian Social Institute in Bucharest, June 10. In: Sacalis, Nicolae (1997): Politics of Culture and Politics of Education – in Romania and abroad. Bucharest: National Romanian Adult Education Association, Folk Univ. 'Ioan I. Dalles'. P. 127

education), which was meant to be not merely a follow-up of the 'ordinary' or 'standard' school (i.e. formal education), but especially complementary to it. This school, specially designed for 'grown-up youth' had to have definite goals for achieving *people's culture*.

3. Andragogy and adult education: theory and practice

From the beginning, it must be emphasized that Iorga and Gusti did not make such distinction sharply. However, a remarkable asset they had in common was composed of the knowledge they had of their contemporary theoretical and practical gains in the field of adult education. Again, it is an aspect only slightly mentioned in the quoted article.

The specialists have currently noticed that too much theory leads to mistaken lanes, often far beyond practice, particularly when a mighty bureaucracy intervenes between. Nevertheless, Iorga and Gusti have lived such experience on their own when dealing with previous misaddressed politics of culture. It seems to be an unwritten law of education in general: the more theory is proclaimed – maybe with the best intentions – the less expected effects could occur. Centralization of this kind of politics has unhappy entailments, because it does not aim the fulfilment of spiritual needs of individuals and society (at the 'bottom') but, on the contrary, tries to impose them inefficient external imperatives (from the 'top'). Bureaucrats, circular letters, meetings etc. are elements that cannot guarantee a successful politics of culture.

But when do we have the proof that the principles of adult education (i.e. of the politics of culture) have succeeded? Iorga believes that this is best shown at the time of great collective movements (revolutions, wars, great battles), coming from the depth of the people's soul, activating its most intrinsic convictions and feelings. In this respect, there is a kind of education and culture 'low profile' – often undetected and neglected by governmental bureaucrats – which gives the best results since it goes directly to the soul of the people. Only when somebody (a grown-up person) does understand intimately an idea or a principle on a basis of personal living experience one could speak about a successful act of education. For instance, instead of everyday academic speeches about national idea, which often create constrained feelings, it would be better to deepen young people into the national reality as they become in time able to develop those feelings as elaborations from the inside of their own beings.

4. Adult education vs. formal education

When doing in practice adult education and politics of culture, there is a temptation of substituting the activity really required and efficient with lectures on or applications of certain formal discipline(s). Obviously, it is much easier to do so and, of course, totally mistaken. Moreover, if bureaucracy and centralism mixes there, a fatal split between intentions and results is to be expected.

But what could bring specialization for adult education? Why does it not fit its purposes? A good specialist of a certain discipline could be helpful for adult education, anyway, not by preaching theoretically its propositions as dogmas. For instance, Iorga has emphasized that: '... you won't do it [politics of culture – n.ns.] with people dedicated to the specialized culture, but with those having the whole culture of their people inside them. Not with historians, philosophers or philologists would you do this thing, but with people keeping in their minds whatever it needs from philosophy, history, philology in order to become complete Romanians'⁶. It comes out that specialization is only the first step to do adult education successfully. And it may be that, sometimes, a specialist in a certain field would not be at all recommended for adult education.

The problem of specialized literature concerned Gusti in all his sociological empirical research. He noticed that in the villages, libraries were supplied by a lot of specialized books in different domains, regardless to the real life of peasants. There was nothing than an illusion of central authorities at the time that this way the village inhabitants could draw a real benefit, even if they had to be in some sort cultivated. 'With such kind of libraries, he said, the culture in the villages cannot be spread out. But in as much as less could get the true culture citizenship in the village through a few conferences, given from time to time by somebody who, no matter how interesting could speak, appears in and disappears out of the village, like a shooting star'⁷. All seems to get along with the idea that simple *information* does not automatically involve *formation*. The lecture of a book or the listening of a conference makes a desirable change in social interactions only if it corresponds to somebody's intimate motivation.

6 Iorga, Nicolae (1927). In: op. cit. P. 117, 118

7 Gusti, Dimitrie (1928). In: op. cit. P. 126

5. Institutions of adult education: foreign experience vs. local demands

Being very aware of and knowing very well the specific adult education movements throughout Europe at that time (for instance, *Volkshochschulbewegung* in Germany; '*Masaryk Academy*' in Czechoslovakia; the Austrian *Volksheim* with the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* project), Iorga and Gusti pleaded for the needs of a new kind of education in Romania, applicable in innovative learning-practice institutions and ruled by the principles of '*Andragogik*' ('*Andragogy*') – it is the word that Gusti uses exactly in original German in his writings, probably because he believed it to be the most adequate. But this new education had to substantiate itself into adequate institutions and activities for the educational needs of local inhabitants. As specialization does not guarantee the success of adult education or politics of culture, a mechanical taking over of what has been done in foreign countries could easily compromise this aim as well. That is why Iorga and Gusti have founded specific Romanian cultural and educational institutions.

The institutional achievements of Iorga and Gusti in the field of adult education are consistently mentioned in the article of Mr. Prof. Sacalis. They knew they were the beginners of a previously inexistent tradition. However, one must point out that their ways of transforming ideas into institutions were different but, nevertheless, complementary.

For instance, Iorga has set up the Folk University in Valenii de Munte (district of Prahova), where he gave series of lectures every summer. He invited there a lot of scholars and public personalities for giving lecture series and conferences; this way, he created the conditions for extending the rural community school to a broader audience.

On the contrary, Gusti dedicated himself together with his students and fellows to the sociological empirical research all-over the country. He was very impressed by the folk-school model associated with Romanian villages, particularly by the organization of the non-formal, systemic and multi-purpose learning activities around village libraries. Also, he organized educational training groups that ensured the book supply from a wide range of disciplines for the teachers of villages.

Thus, they have both had in mind the education addressed to rural communities, aimed for the training of local leaders – the most able to prove a positive influence on their neighbours while doing

common works in agriculture or inside their households.

In the view of Iorga and Gusti, an efficient politics of culture (as well as, we could say, adult education) must observe the following principles: elevated culture cannot be split from people's culture; culture must be let to live in freedom, spontaneously and according to the national specific; the governmental institutions responsible for the organization of national culture must have a large autonomy; such institutions are designed to ensure proper conditions for the culture, by discovering, stimulating and organizing the cooperation of all cultural actors of the country⁸.

6. Conclusion: lessons for today

In the interwar Romania, the activity of Iorga and Gusti in adult education and politics of culture (as they have conceived it) has got a great acknowledgement and was quite a success. Even in the recent years, they are often seen as venerable models of a time with the most important cultural achievements in the whole Romanian history before 1945.

Unfortunately, their endeavor to innovate adult education has been completely neglected after the instauration of the communist political power in 1945. But, beside the interference of politics, which turned then everything completely upside down, however, the adult education in interwar Romania did not have enough time to succeed in reaching a theoretical paradigm ('andragogy'), so all these efforts remained somehow for a half-century without the desirable outcome.

It is now up to those specialists who set up again the system of adult education after the 1989 Revolution – most part of it with the help of National Romanian Adult Education Association and the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association, local Bureau of Bucharest – to reconsider these valuable traditions and to renew them according to contemporary imperatives of the European Union.

I believe that maybe the most important lesson that Iorga and Gusti have transmitted to us, those who are living in the present, is the way of becoming an 'adult educator' – most important, a successful one. Briefly, those who want to dedicate themselves to adult education in Romania (perhaps in other countries, too), especially those officials who are appointed to take decisions for education, must keep in their minds that education and culture are

intimately linked. These have to be a permanent preoccupation for a country's government. As Gusti said, the problem of culture refers even to economy turnover: if moral-spiritual values were absent, there it would not be any economic efficiency at all. Then, somebody who wants and has to deal with adult education has to learn her/himself how to overcome the self-content when being a specialist in a certain field. Besides, these persons have to take always into account the specific local needs of adult population, not identifying or confusing them with those of foreign countries.

Last, but not least, I think that there is a special morality, a particular ethos that Iorga and Gusti have let us as a valuable legacy in the culture and adult education. It is both important to know and to apply a tank of knowledge in a certain field; but much more important is to live and to assume them in a creative and responsible manner, in as much as to make them a model for those presents and those who will come.

8 Ibidem. P. 130-131